

“Who is the Beast?”

Essay on Rudyard Kipling’s “The Mark of the Beast”

In “The Mark of the Beast”, Rudyard Kipling writes about conflict between cultures and the nature of humanity. An example of this conflict is shown in the differing treatments of the Silver Man, a leper revered by the priests of Hanuman and an important figure in the story. While the priests honor the Silver Man, the Englishmen do not. They see him as being like a beast—uncivilized, unclean, less than human. The narrator refers to the Silver Man’s vocals as being “like the mewing of an otter” (Kipling 873) or other animalistic noises, and notes especially “the slab that took [his face’s] place” (Kipling 879). In comparing the Silver Man’s actions to those of an animal, the narrator creates an equivalence between them—thinking of the Silver Man as being like an animal implies he is one. Emphasizing the unusual nature of the Silver Man’s face also serves to set him apart from “normal” humans. The narrator also explicitly calls the Silver Man less than human; when he sees the Silver Man approach the house, the narrator says, “[The Silver Man] was an unattractive sight, and thinking of poor Fleete, brought to such degradation by so foul a creature, I put away all my doubts and resolved to help Strickland...with all tortures that might be needful” (Kipling 879). He not only calls the Silver Man a foul, unclean *creature*, but considers contact with him especially degrading to Fleete. His focus on Fleete additionally degrades the Silver Man by centering Fleete as the suffering person, and considering the Silver Man only as a cause of that suffering. As well, the fact that the Silver Man’s unattractiveness would remove the narrator’s guilt for harming him also dehumanizes him, as it implies his unappealing nature makes him less human, and thus that harming him is acceptable. As he shows in many ways, the narrator considers the Silver Man beastlike: disgusting, animalistic, and subhuman, a view he holds throughout the story.